

Frankie Myers

Dr. Cliona O'Gallchoir

English 2023

University College Cork

18 January 2005

On the Values Associated with Nature in the Poetry of the Late Eighteenth Century

A great deal of literature in the late eighteenth century stressed a value in nature and the rural life over artifice and civilization. This period saw a renewed appreciation for natural beauty and a newfound remorse for the old ways of life that conquest and modernization had brought to extinction. There was an opinion that, despite the advancements of modern society, something had been lost. Nature, and the rural ways of life which lived in harmony with it, came to represent purity and virtue.

Eighteenth century British life was highly refined, a fact that was championed in the early half of the century. Early eighteenth century authors such as Alexander Pope, Samuel Richardson, and Daniel Defoe focused on the refined, urban, upper-class lifestyle for material (whether it be in praise or for satire). It was characteristic of Enlightenment thinking to view society as a whole as progressive, to champion rationality and scientific advancement, and to point to metropolitan centres like London as pinnacles of human achievement. Rural communities were seen as uninteresting or even backwards. Nature was something to be subdued. Classical composers of the time such as Mozart and

Hayden stressed rigid structure and tonal balance. Art, including literature, was deliberately *artificial*.

However, for many authors later in the century, the high life was extraordinarily decadent and boring as a subject for literature. Thus, a dramatic shift began in British literature with a new emphasis on rural, more natural ways of life. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in British poetry. Instead of looking to the cities for inspiration, late eighteenth century poets like William Cowper and Thomas Gray wrote about the countryside, folk traditions, and the beauty of nature. Poetry of this time was more expressive and emotional than earlier works, and the author often identified his own thoughts and emotions in the poem—a departure from the Enlightenment ideal of detached rationality.

These changes in literature were part of the broader Romantic Movement which also revolutionized music and social ideals. The rigid structure and carefully constructed harmonies of Mozart gave way to the unpredictable atonality and raw expressiveness of Beethoven. The French Revolution brought about new ideas about social hierarchy and civil liberty. It brought about an emphasis on the individual, and the literature reflects this emphasis, often portraying characters in solitude and expressing their own unique thoughts and emotions. Artists became more assertive and visible within society (beforehand, artists were often not even credited with their works). Art was not just supposed to be enjoyable, but it was also supposed to *say* something. Eighteenth century poetry was no exception.

Cowper's "The Task" contrasts modern refinement and convenience with the simple pleasures of nature. He begins by describing the sofa, a common object of

modern convenience, and then transitions to a walk in the country where he reflects on the delightful sights and sounds of nature and the superiority of nature to art: “God made the country, man made the town” (line 749). In this contrast, his poem reflects the differences between the early and the late eighteenth century ideals of nature.

The key transitional line in the poem is in line 109: “For I have loved the rural walk. . . .” Up until this point in the poem, Cowper is describing the developments that led to the sofa, or more broadly, the increasing disconnect between man and nature as reflected in increasing degrees of refinement and artificiality in technology. After this point, he reflects on what is lost when society adopts such objects as the sofa. He speaks fondly of his boyhood ramblings along the banks of the Thames “O’er hills, through valleys, and by rivers brink.” Despite the ruggedness of nature, the brambles, the “scarlet hips and stoney haws” that he would eat, “No Sofa then awaited my return, / Nor Sofa then I needed” (113-127).

Cowper presents the sofa as the outcome of years of development in seating technology—from stools, wooden chairs, and cushions, to the sofa. This presentation is characteristic of Enlightenment notions of progress and improvement. He also emphasises the natural raw materials, the “solid oak” and the bamboo from India which go into the construction of the devices, and as he describes each generation, the natural materials become further and further removed from their original forms. Nature, after all, was something that should be subdued, and one characteristic of refined technology was how little it resembled anything in nature. For Cowper, natural beauty was supreme to any human contrivance—be it a sofa or a city. Lines 750-68 contrast the deceptive charm of the city with the enduring beauty of the countryside:

Possess ye therefore, ye who, borne about
 In chariots and sedans, know no fatigue
 But that of idleness, and taste no scenes
 But such as art contrives...
 ...We can spare
 The splendour of your lamps, they but eclipse
 Our softer satellite. Your songs confound
 our more harmonious notes: the thrush departs
 Sacred, and the offended nightingale is muted.

Cowper himself had a country upbringing and distinguished himself from more classically-trained urban poets such as Pope as being more authentic and more in tune with nature. “Thou knowest my praise of nature most sincere, / And that my raptures are not conjured up / To serve occasions of poetic pomp” (150-52). Rather than try to mask his humble heritage (as today you might try to “lose your accent”), he openly wears it as a badge of honour. This was characteristic of late eighteenth century artists who were more openly expressive and visible as individuals than their predecessors. By doing this, it is clear that Cowper is expressing *his* point of view—the poem is personal for him and not just an exercise in writing pretty lines.

The remainder of Book 1 (and indeed most of the remaining books) of the poem are devoted to singing the praises of nature and the humble life. Cowper emphasizes natural fertility and a balance between nature and rural life: “a level plain of spacious meads with cattle sprinkled o’er” (164), “the grace of hedge-row beauties numberless” (172-3), “anle-deep in moss and flow’ry thyme” (270), “the well-water’d land” (323).

By contrast, he heavily criticises cities: “Rank abundance breeds / In gross and pamper'd cities sloth and lust, / And wantonness and gluttonous excess” (687-89).

Thus, Cowper shows a reverence for nature and a clear preference for a more, balanced, natural way of life, despite the so-called comforts of modern society. His poem is emotional and autobiographical, and it seems fixed on nothing but the authors' own thoughts, meandering through its various subjects like a conversation between two old friends. His solitary walks through the countryside are meditative and soothing and point the way to happiness and spiritual well-being.

Thomas Gray's “The Bard” is an ode to the bards of Wales who told the native oral traditions before the conquest of Edward I. Like Cowper, Gray puts a strong emphasis on being in tune with nature. He uses a variety of natural imagery to depict the bard as a magical, almost godlike being, who exists in harmony with—perhaps indistinguishable from, the mountains, rivers, and trees of his homeland. Nature is personified as joining in the author's anger and mourning for the loss of the bard-poets:

Hark, how each giant-oak, and desert cave,
Sighs to the torrent's awful voice beneath!
O'er thee, o King! Their hundred arms they wave,
Revenge on thee in harsher murmurs breath;
...
Mountains, ye mourn in vain
Modred, whose magic song
Made huge Plinlimmon bow his cloud-topped head.
On dreary Arvon's shore they lie,

Smear'd with gore, and ghastly pale:
 Far, far aloof th'affrighted ravens sail;
 The famish'd Eagle screams, and passes by.
 Dear lost companions of my tuneful art,
 Dear, as the light that visits these sad eyes,
 Dear, as the ruddy drops that warm my heart,
 Ye died amidst your dying country's cries—
 No more I weep. They do not sleep. (31-43)

Here, Gray also emphasizes the discord between nature and Edward's army. The conquerors were not only evil and deserving of the bard's curse, but they were antagonistic to nature itself, leaving the frightened and hungry ravens and eagles to abandon the land. Thus, to fight against the people of Wales is to fight against the nature of Wales as well.

Gray bestows enormous power to the natural land in his poem. Although the bards are all dead (save this last one who is telling the tale), the opening stanza proclaims that Edward should fear the curse placed on him—a curse that is to be carried out not by living people but by the land (Cambria) itself:

Ruin seize thee, ruthless King!
 Confusion on thy banners wait,
 Tho' fann'd by Conquest's crimson wing
 They mock the air with idle state.
 Helm, nor Hauberk's twisted mail,
 Nor even thy virtues, Tyrant, shall avail

To save thy secret soul from nightly fears,
 From Cambria's curse, from Cambria's tears! (5-8)

Another common characteristic of late eighteenth century poetry is the emphasis on nature as a personal, solitary experience. Both "The Task" and "The Bard" emphasize this, and so does Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard": "The plowman homeward plods his weary way, / And leaves the world to darkness and to me." This both applies to his own walk through the graveyard as well as the people buried there: "Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade, / Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap, / Each in his narrow cell for ever laid, / The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep." Here, the solitude of each grave is emphasized.

The "Elegy" is a tribute to those poor peasants whose lives, though noble, are forgotten. Nature is used throughout to emphasize this theme: "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air" (53-4). The poem also connects nature to God and uses it to reinforce the notion that we are all equal before God. In the Epitaph at the end of the poem, the mourner is put to rest "upon the lap of Earth" and also in "The bosom of his Father and his God" (117-128). The graveyard appears to include both peasants and upper class members of society, and despite the variety of lives that once inhabited those bodies, they are now equalled in the face of nature and God: "The paths of glory lead but to the grave" (36). The poem contrasts the ephemeral and transient lives of man (even in the course of the poem we see the mourner die and be buried) with the constancy of nature. We see this in Gray's description of the graveyard trees: the "rugged elms" (13) and the "nodding beech / That reaths its old fantastic roots so high" (101-12).

The late eighteenth century was a period in history when a number of ideals were shifting, and poets often turned to nature for both support and inspiration. The emphasis on progress and refinement in the early part of the century gave way to an emphasis on a harmony with nature, personal liberty and expression, and humility. Rural life was idolized, and its simplicity, solitude, and balance with nature came to represent the ultimate source of spiritual and emotional well-being.